

The THIEVES' MARKET By George Agnew Chamberlain

The Story of a Girl Who Went to Mexico in Quest of Adventure—and Found It.



The dog was transformed into a yelping whirlwind of protest. Hildegard leaped back and averted from his plunging.

MISS HILDEGARDE ESTES was at a loose end. The last two years had seen her torn from a web of frivolous occupations and had moved her like a pawn into the front line of certain undertakings intimately concerned with her country's welfare. The measure of her usefulness is unimportant to this tale, but not so the magnitude of the awakening which came to her automatically with her release at the close of hostilities; she herself formed no idea of its import until she tried to go back to her ancient ways, only to find that the many social engagements which had once given her the illusion of a full life now seemed a flock of buzzing bees bent on driving her to distraction.

"If they would only sting!" she cried aloud. But no; they were noisy yet innocuous, busy yet futile, ever present yet elusive, potent in annoyance, but powerless to pierce the hard veneer of conventionality and stir those sources of genuine emotion which, once tasted, turn all superficial sensations flat upon the tongue of experience.

In vain did Miss Estes look about her for such trouble as would keep in quick suspense the depths newly discovered in her nature. She had no inclination for the bizarre nor for any of those restless contentions of weak spirits which seek relief first in bobbed hair and finally in selling license. To her clear vision petty sins were still petty even when seen through the exaggerating microscope of self. In love, she would never be subject to the hallucination that no one else had ever been there before; in vulgar surrender, she could never deceive herself with the immemorial comfort that her case was "different."

She should not be pictured, however, as showing a forbidding or even a severe front to the world, for she was wonderfully well trained in all the nuances of social intercourse which take the sharp edges from everyday contacts. She was ever ready with the cordial smile, the look of quick sympathy, of interest, of meticulously measured understanding, which in combination form the mask of culture, endowing their possessor with acquired charm and exacting from others a uniform and equal consideration seldom reaching the bedrock of friendship but none the less useful as the small change of current life.

To these attractions, inculcated by training, she added certain gifts of God and man. She was good to behold. A trifle above medium height, square shouldered, deep bodied, long limbed, swift yet graceful in movement, she presented a figure which not only caught the eye but held it. A fleeting glimpse of her left one hungry and dissatisfied, but to the few who were privileged to see her in repose there was ample recompense. Her hair was dark, plentiful, and on damp days decidedly curly; her eyes were of a deep brown, and occasionally when they widened to some absorbing thought were seen to contain innumerable flecks of gold in lucid suspension. The brows above them and the mobile lips below were set in the wide arch and the full curves which denote individuality backed by courage.

Dark women who aspire to beauty must be exceedingly pale or of high coloring. Miss Estes was of the latter classification; her cheeks glowed with the dusky red of the Bourbon rose, deep yet vivid. Man, in the person of a father deceased, had bestowed upon her an ample but not spectacular income.

Such was the girl who on her twenty-fourth birthday penetrated to the fastnesses which guarded the million dollar a year man who had but recently been her chief at four bits per annum, demanded and obtained an interview, and, as is the way of lovely woman with a purpose, chatted away comfortably until she was sure her cure had had time to get in its deadly work, and then said, "By the way."

"By the way, do you remember asking me if there was anything in the world you could do for me?"

"Yes! I do. And you said, 'Not one little thing.' However, I won't hold that against you. Shoot."

"Well," said Miss Estes with her most pleading smile, "today is my birthday and I want a passport to Mexico."

"What for?" asked the magnate.

"I thought of using it to go to Mexico," replied Miss Estes demurely.

"To go to Mexico!" repeated the magnate unsmilingly. "Why do you want to go there of all places under the sun? Don't you know that the country is turned upside down, that trains are being blown up daily, foreigners kidnapped and sometimes murdered, and that all the common relations of life are distorted in the glare of anarchy?"

At each item of this graphic word picture Miss Estes' eyes deepened dreamily, while the expression of her whole face brightened by leaps and bounds.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad to hear you talk that way. It sounds too good to be true. You see, that's why I'm going. Something might happen."

"Just what do you mean by that?" said one of the busiest of men, laying aside the sheaf of morning mail he had been holding as a cumulative hint.

"You see, it's this way," replied Miss Estes promptly. "I'm bored. I'm terribly bored. The disorder in Europe doesn't appeal to me at all; it's so—so foreseen, so known. Like

the rest of us, I'm tired of it. It's a perfectly natural and physical repulsion arising from having eaten too much of that dish at a gulp. So I'm bored, suffocated. If I stay here I shall die of inanition, and I'd rather be murdered. Wouldn't you?"

"Leave me out, please," said the magnate. "Forget Mexico. Go start a girls' polo team. I'll lend you my ponies."

"Here, baby," murmured Miss Estes, "you can't have a stick of dynamite; take a stick of candy and be happy."

"Exactly!" said her ex-chief, and picked up once more his letters.

Miss Estes leaned back in her chair and covered a yawn with one hand.

"You know," she said presently, "I've been going into this matter pretty thoroughly. I find that the Rio Grande is a miserable little stream during the dry season; in fact, that its volume is nothing in comparison with the flood of contraband that flows across it under the sparse noses of our border officials. Of course, there's about one chance in ten of getting shot while impersonating contraband, but I'm going to take it unless you get me the passport. It will be a beginning, perhaps."

"My dear," said the magnate, who was twice as old as Miss Estes in years and thrice her age in experience, "I see you have made up your mind. I'll get you the passport."

Three weeks later Miss Estes, with a smart black suitcase and a huge English wicker basket trunk, arrived on an early spring morning at the border town of Laredo and jotted down in her diary: "Flat, muddy streets, ramshackle buildings, a thousand Ford's, two motor cars, and a smell of onions."

It was her first entry, and as she carried no letters or documents besides her passport, it was the only bit of writing she had to show the censor upon arrival at the bridgehead. He happened to be a native son, and his eyes narrowed malignantly as they read these cabalistic signs.

"What's this?" he demanded. "A code?"

Miss Estes felt a sinking of the heart. The whole atmosphere of the bridgehead was one of suspicion on the part of the authorities and of anxious faces, nervous hands, tedious waiting, and in some instances of despair for the hurried herds of travelers. Here, just at the start of her enterprise, she had made a fool of herself. Why couldn't she have waited until she got across?

"That's a description of Kansas City," she lied hopefully, and tried to smile.

"I been to Kansas City once," remarked the official, raised his nose, sniffed the air, and declared with an ominous finality, "This here is a description of Laredo."

"Well," stammered Miss Estes, still striving to look jovial, "I didn't say anything about Fort McIntosh, did I?"

No smile lightened the solemnity of the official's gaze; he stared long and accusingly at the girl and finally pocketed the diary with purposeful deliberation.

"Leave your address," he said finally, "and perhaps we'll forward it to you."

"Couldn't you tear out the sheet?" asked Miss Estes, blushing with shame because she felt cowed. "It's the only notebook I have."

The official made no reply, stamped her passport, handed it to her, and turned to the next applicant, a bronzed young man of thirty, who alone of the throng of travelers seemed smilingly at ease. He did not bother even to look at the inspector; his eyes followed Miss Estes' slightly wilted figure, his hand grasped instinctively his own papers of

identification the moment they were ready, and his feet then led him promptly in pursuit.

He stared at Miss Estes as she stepped into her waiting jitney and at the wagon in front of it which bore her enormous hamper trunk, looking clean, majestic, and incongruous in its solitary enthrone. It was not the only thing that seemed out of its element in the sordid and littered atmosphere of the international bridge. There was something about Miss Estes' smartly tailored traveling suit of blue serge, about her ravishingly becoming sport hat, and about her admirably fitted high laced boots that brought a quizzical gleam to the young man's gray eyes. In fluent Spanish he ordered his greaser chauffeur not to pass her conveyance and to follow it to its destination on the Mexican side.

This incurred for him a much longer wait at the farther end of the bridge than would have been otherwise necessary, owing to Miss Estes' trouble with the customs, but he was not in a hurry; his reservations were made and his baggage had gone across early in the morning in charge of a disreputable individual who carried in his ready palm an open sesame through all regulations and red tape. Accompanied by a guard, Miss Estes' trunk, followed by herself, made its way through the tortuous streets of the shabby town toward the suburbs and a miserable edifice sunk in a deep hollow as though ashamed of itself and of the dung heaps which surrounded it.

"Is that the station?" she demanded of her driver.

He shook his head and grinned.

"No station," he replied. "Fumigation."

"Fumigation!" cried Miss Estes, looking in horror at her filthy destination and then in dazed dismay at her clean trunk, shining suitcase, and immaculate self.

The young man with the gray eyes heard that cry; at a word his car ranged alongside.

"Don't worry," he called, "and don't get out. Just sit pat."

The wagon and the two cars drew up at the entrance to the fumigation shed; the young man sprang out, shook hands with various spitting and loading officials, slapped one or two of them on the back, said a few easy words, reached into a pocket, shook hands again, waved to Miss Estes' driver, reentered his conveyance, and led the cortege in triumph to the ramshackle station a mile away.

"Have you your ticket?" he asked as the girl alighted.

"None," she stammered, not from embarrassment at being addressed by a stranger, but because she felt helpless and consequently indignant. Everything was so crowded, dirty, and disordered that the mere finding of the dirty booth where tickets were to be had would have taken her more time than was left for embarkation on that day's train.

"Stand where you are," said the young man. "Don't move."

He disappeared; in five minutes he was back with a porter, who seized the big hamper trunk, swung it to his shoulders, and went jostling through the crowd. Miss Estes stared wildly at her smoothly energetic self-appointed mentor, but he only smiled and called:

"Watch your suitcase every minute."

A quarter of an hour later he returned alone cool and collected in the sweating, excited throng. He took off his hat as he handed her three slips of paper. "This," he said, "is your ticket to the City; this is the Pullman, a lower by the grace of God, and this is your baggage check. The lot,

including the porter, cost sixty-four pesos, thirty-two dollars American.

Miss Estes opened a small locked black trunk about six inches square which she carried on one wrist, extracted the sum, and handed it to him. He took the money, picked up her suitcase, escorted her to her seat in the Pullman, bowed, and disappeared. For ten minutes the turmoil and commotion increased in a steady crescendo which seemed to demand nothing less than a thunderclap as a climax, but finally contented itself with the weak clang of a bell and an ineffectual toot. They were off.

Miss Estes looked through the car surreptitiously and then with undisguised anxiety. This young man was nowhere to be seen. What had become of him? In looking after her comfort had he been left behind? What would he think of her? Not a word of thanks, not one! It seemed to her now astounding that for the first time in her life she should have been slow in conventional gratitude; she did not realize that training is largely dependent upon environment and that a young person even of the best antecedents is apt to succumb momentarily to the unseating powers of a thousand new sights, scenes, and customs jumbled into a single, disconcerting whole.

Feeling suddenly deserted and very lonely, she tried in vain to interest herself in the featureless country through which they were passing and finally dozed to awake about noon in the hubbub of the station at Monterrey. The train stayed there for almost half an hour, during which she stared with interest and loathing at the extraordinary assortment of food and drinks which was being peddled from filthy receptacles by filthy vendors.

She could not know that peppers, onions, and cheese rolled up in a tortilla, fried and drenched in a greasy sauce, were the well known delicacy called *enchiladas*; that another tortilla bent into the shape of a canoe and filled with pieces of fried entrail and known as *chicharrones* had made mouths water for generations; that *chicharrones*, pork hide cooked like our cracklings, also enjoyed a wide popularity, and that bits of meat and the lesser organs of the pig chopped up and fried in the grease of the aforementioned *chicharrones* made an unfailing appeal under the name of *carnitas*.

She was glad when the train finally pulled out and had settled back to attempt another nap when the porter touched her on the shoulder to attract her attention and laid a small parcel on the seat beside her. It was addressed to her by name. She stared at it curiously for a long moment, as is the way of a woman, then broke the string, tore off the wrapping and disclosed a fresh notebook, on the first page of which was written in a masculine hand, "Here's a new one, but please be more careful. Mark Ridenour."

Her face, lugubrious during many hours of loneliness, suddenly broke into an assortment of smiles. She rang for the porter and asked:

"Where is Mr. Ridenour?"

"In the drawing room, Miss," replied the old Negro with a broad grin at her relief upon finding that, true to the traditions of sleeping car attendants the world over, he spoke English.

For a moment she sat clasping her hands nervously, then she remembered that she was out for adventure and by no means inclined to be satisfied with anything so passive as the traditional still hunt allotted to "nice" women—hateful word, "nice." She

across, went to the door of the drawing room, and knocked.

"Come in," cried a voice.

She opened the door and disclosed Mr. Ridenour in his shirt sleeves before a table, scattered cards, three pipes, and a package of cigars. She glanced about the ample space of the small room and thought of the jammed knees throughout the rest of the car.

"How selfish!" she murmured.

"Do you play pinochle?" asked Mr. Ridenour, gathering up the cards.

"Yes," said Miss Estes, closed the door, and sat down facing him.

He produced a second pack, sorted it out, shuffled, cut for himself, and dealt. They began to play, they kept on playing, they played for two solid hours. At the end of that time Miss Estes threw down her hand, jumbled all the cards on the table, and met Mr. Ridenour's mildly inquiring gaze with the full and belligerent stare of her fine eyes.

"Do you never stoop to questions?" she inquired in the carefully modulated voice of one asking for trouble. She felt her breast flutter almost to betrayal with the thousand queries she had been putting to herself during the two hours of surface calm. What had happened to her personality? Had she none? Could nothing startle the mind of man? Was it true that only women are curious. What did this man think of her? Did women, nice women—damn the word!—habitually wander into his drawing rooms, invited or uninvited?

Mr. Ridenour laid aside his hot pipe, picked up a cool one, and proceeded to fill it. "I seldom ask questions aloud," he said finally. "A question is an invitation to a lie, conscious or unconscious. Few of us have the power to speak the truth, but we all tell it sooner or later."

Most people require an hour or more to catch the taste of red meat in any casual phrase, but Miss Estes was an exception. She had been so thoroughly trained in the school of persiflage that a speech burdened with a grain of genuine thought immediately stood out to view by the alchemy of contrast. Her eyes narrowed and studied Mr. Ridenour with an entirely new interest.

"You said something," she murmured, and added hastily, "I don't mean that for slang; you actually said something."

Mr. Ridenour ruffled the cards, his eyes fallen to impersonal consideration of their telescoping backs.

"Has that happened to you so seldom?" he inquired, apparently in a mere effort to be obliging and ask a question, any question.

"Very seldom," replied Miss Estes, and promptly dismissed the side issue by asking, "Have you really no curiosity?"

"Curiosity?" repeated Mr. Ridenour. "That's a horse of another color—a plebeian! I have loads of curiosity, and I generally satisfy it. You are Miss Hildegard Estes, spinster, twenty-four years old, born under the agis but not quite under the pall of Boston; you graduated from society into war work; did well. Now you're bored and looking for excitement. As our British pals are wont to say, you are now inclined to 'chance your arm' in Mexico."

He raised his eyes, but dropped them quickly before the astonishment and dismay displayed in the girl's face. "I beg your pardon," he murmured. "That was cheap of me, and the worst of it is I can't tell you how I got the information."

Miss Estes stared at him fixedly, and as a deep flush rose slowly to his cheeks her eyes narrowed just as slowly to a look of concentrated shrewdness surprising in one so young.

"You have read my record," she stated finally, "as supplied to the State Department, the Military Intelligence, and probably to various bureaus of the Department of Justice. That means you are an agent of sorts."

She measured the color that deepened in his cheeks and continued pitilessly:

"You are scarcely a professional; probably a volunteer recruit to the civilian auxiliary. You, too, felt the slump; you, too, were bored, and to save yourself from yourself, and perhaps too much money, you are also 'chancing your arm' in Mexico."

Ridenour sighed deeply, tossed the cards aside, and met Miss Estes' triumphant gaze.

"You have a right to think me a novice," he said. "In my silly effort to show off I was guilty of the commonest and the most puerile of all the faults of secret agents. I am partially in your hands, Miss Estes, and it behooves me to throw myself entirely on your mercy. I have been down here before, many times. You will find me widely known as a mining engineer with highly legitimate local interests. I tell you, however, in the frankest and most abject confidence, that the principal object of this special trip is to secure an embezzler. Once I find him, it will take me about forty-eight hours to finish up."

"You say you've been here before," asked Miss Estes with curling lip, "and you expect to get justice in two days?"

"It's a certainty," replied Ridenour calmly. "I know a bunch here who are men in their own way; they deliver the goods at a price, but unfailingly. I shall procure justice through injustice. They'll chuck my prospect across the border where I say and when I say—at a price, of course. Now you know, the strong arm of the Almighty Dollar."

Miss Estes' eyes gleamed. "Oh!" she gasped. "I believe you. I can't help it. It's the sort of thing I want to believe and that I came to see. Won't you let me?"

Ridenour laughed. "Why," he said, "there's simply nothing to see. I spot my man; I show him to the gang; I say, 'Wednesday's train at Eagle Pass'; I get the proper channel to send a code message, and it's all over as far as I'm concerned."

"And is there no excitement? None?" demanded Miss Estes despairingly.

"Well," conceded Ridenour after deliberation, "I have to find my man, of course. You never can tell."

"Take me with you," begged Miss Estes. Ridenour shook his head in denial.

"Why not?" demanded the girl.

"Because you never can tell," he replied.

"But that's why!" insisted Hildegard, her brown eyes filling with moisture in her eagerness.

He shook his head again. "You're too nice, too impeccable, too perfectly in good taste in a highly imperfect world, too lovely, too entirely conspicuous, and—valueable."

"Paradise and prunes!" remarked Miss Estes in a voice suddenly gone hard. "You'll promise to take me with you, or when we land at the station I'll shout, 'This is Mr. Mark Ridenour, special agent, looking for an embezzler.' Somebody will understand, some reporter. Don't look at me like that. I mean it. Blackmail? Well, what of it? Do you think I came down here to fool around and lose time?"

He looked at her gravely for a long moment, but finally his lips curved in a slow smile. "All right," he said. "I promise."

He kept his word. During their first few days and nights in the City he showed her the panorama of its varying life in a descending scale which keyed her appetite for adventure higher and higher as they penetrated into lower and still lower purities, until reason and desire cried aloud within her that a climax was overdue.

At first she had been filled with fears that Ridenour might trick her, show her tourist sights, take her back to the hotel, and then slip out to the real thing in the unsafe streets of the wee hours, but as she grew to know him better she looked back with shame at that time of doubt. From the first he seemed no less eager for her companionship than she for his, and she was at a loss whether to ascribe his interest to a growing personal regard or to a highly developed sense of the piquancy of playing bulldog to her charms. She had offered to change her attire to suit his fancy, to give up powder puff and parasol, look downy, and, if need be, smoke cigars and at least appear to play the part that hotel lobby gossip doubtless ascribed to her, but Ridenour had only smiled, shaken his head, and said hurriedly:

"No, no. I like you just as you are, please. Let them stare but not touch, blast their eyes!"

He taught her two words in Spanish to say to any *flit*, any slicked street worm, who might accost her while his back was turned, and after having occasion to use them several times and note their telling effect she teased him into a translation.

"Those idiomatic expressions aren't easily put into English," said Ridenour, "but the words mean, more or less, 'senile and decrepit old fool.' Said as you say them, they are better than a slap in the face. They lead not to combat but retreat on the part of the enemy."

"I should say they do," murmured Miss Estes. "They work beautifully."

She thought over Ridenour's half explanation and felt an increasing respect for this man who hated to draw a complete map, who believed in letting you find things out at least in a measure for yourself. She had wondered more than once at his not whirling to meet with a blow in the good old provincial American style the forked whippers of some of the immaculate loungers who enlarged the slightest inattention of her escort into a chance for conquest. This was why. He had put a weapon into her own hands, a deadly weapon whose use need not lead to the soiling aftermath of a street war.

Thinking these thoughts as they sat at a small table in the crowded *joyer* of *Sylvain*, her amusement can be imagined at feeling Ridenour's foot pressing hers manfully under cover of the board. She moved her foot; he pursued it, pressed it again with deliberate intention. Up to that moment he had never failed to embody her in an atmosphere of absolute safety from himself; up to that moment she had trusted him blindly and had joyed in the semi-intimacies of a companion-

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